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SUBJECT: RICE LETTER ON SUMATE GETS ATTENTION

Summary

1. On July 31, one of Caracas' most important opposition dailies, "El Nacional" carried an article entitled "Condoleezza Rice Criticizes the Political Persecution of Sumate Directors." That same week the Venezuela press has included coverage of a letter from members of the House Committee on International Relations, remarks by State Department spokesman during the regular press briefing, and the "Washington Post" editorial that also expressed concern for Sumate's officers. On August 12, the "Daily Journal" printed an article whose first paragraph reads, "The U.S. government has once again come to bat for Sumate." and cites both Dr. Rice and the House letter. On The opposition press underscored these messages' support for democracy and human rights. The GoV reacted to these letters and remarks by saying that they were further proof that the U.S. was the leader of the opposition. End summary

Dr. Rice's Letter

2. National security advisor Condoleezza Rice wrote a letter July 22, 2004, responding to a missive about Sumate from the president of the Venezuelan chapter of the Stanford alumni. The daily newspaper "El Nacional" extensively quoted rice's letter in an article entitled "Condoleezza Rice Criticizes the Political Persecution of Sumate Directors." The first quote was taken from the letter's last paragraph, "we call on the Venezuelan government to cease its harassment of these individuals and others and to dedicate itself to guaranteeing the free exercise of democratic rights."

Remarks by Other Officials and U.S. Sources

3. "El Nacional" (July 31, 2004) carried a second article on the same page entitled, "U.S. Condemns Intimidation of Civil Society." This second article referred to July 31, 2004 remarks by the department of state spokesman expressing concern "about harassment and intimidation of civil society, whether it be in Venezuela or whether it be anywhere else." This same article also referred to the "Washington Post" editorial on the same subject. GoV media also reported Vice-President Rangel's acknowledgement that the then U.S. Charge had discussed the Sumate and Capriles cases with him on July 29.

House Committee Letter Gets Media Attention

4. A July 12 letter, to president Chavez from the House Committee on International Relations defending Sumate, also received significant play in the Venezuelan press. It was read in its entirety at least twice on 24-hour news channel Globovision and heard on Union Radio (opposition). All the major Caracas dailies carried the letter, with "El Nacional" running the entire text. Beneath the letter was the response of the Venezuelan ambassador in Washington, who remarked, " I must admit that it's unusual for U.S. legislators to give a legal opinion on a specific case in the judicial system of another country."

Pro-Chavez Reaction

5. President Chavez, Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) Deputy Nicolas Maduro, and other GoV officials and media have used the letter to criticize the USG, saying the USG

letters are nothing more than an attempt to defend its lackeys. Samuel Moncada, of the Chavista Comando

Maisanta, held a press conference in which he noted that the letters sent by the National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and comments by other officials "put into question the mandate of the Venezuelan people, which will be tested in the referendum election of August 15." These accusations follow months of direct criticism and accusations by President Chavez during his Sunday Alo Presidente program. He has used the program as a platform to accuse the USG of giving intellectual and financial support to the opposition. Using "declassified" NED documents requested through the FOIA, he is convinced that he has "presented proof."

Sumate Case

¶6. Sumate, an NGO founded in 2002, was founded to support individual freedom and the exercise of constitutional, specifically electoral, rights. While not a party, its immediate goal is to recall Chavez. On June 10, 2004 the GoV formally accused Maria Corina Machado, vice-president of Sumate of conspiracy and treason. In July the prosecutor's office accused three more officers. A fifth official has been summoned for questioning, but has not been formally accused. While currently free, they fear they could be taken into custody at any time.

The International Visitor Connection

¶7. Machado and another Sumate officer (Aldejandro Plaz) were nominated to participate in a FY 2004 multi-regional project on NGO management, but due to their activities, neither could travel. One Sumate representative did participate in a voluntary visitor program to observe the 2004 Florida presidential primary election. On the other side, Luisa Ortega, the public prosecutor in charge of these cases, was nominated to participate in a FY-2004 RP on anti-corruption but she cancelled her participation at the very last minute.

Comment

¶8. President Chavez, party members, and official media have used the letter to renew criticisms of the USG. Dr. Rice's letter complemented expressions of concern by U.S. congressmen and U.S. media.

Shapiro

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